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SUBJECT: BIG BLOC OF SERBIA'S DEMOCRATIC VOTERS
STILL UNDECIDED ABOUT ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Early election forecasts from Serbia's major polling agencies suggest that the ultranationalist Radical and Socialist parties have little chance of forming a government alone after the 21 January elections. Pollsters indicate that President Tadic's Democratic Party (DS) and PM Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) will be in a position to form the core of a democratic government, if they can put aside their differences. The more than 20 percent of certain voters who have yet to decide for whom to vote are ripe for the picking by democratic parties, but have not responded to the DS's still somewhat unfocused campaign. G17 Plus and the upstart Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have been the fastest out of the blocks, but face tougher sledding once the DS and DSS start throwing a lot of money into their campaigns after New Year's. We have not seen any electoral bounce for the democrats from the PfP invitation. End Summary.

THE EARLY NUMBERS

¶2. (U) Serbia's most reliable polling agencies--the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), Medium Gallup, Scan, and Strategic Marketing (SMMRI)--have recently conducted public opinion surveys that provide a somewhat clearer picture of the prospects of the main contenders in the 21 January parliamentary elections. The following are their current survey results measuring the parties' percentage of support from determined voters:

PARTY	CeSID	Gallup	Scan	SMMRI
SRS	30	30	28	32
DS	27	25	25	27
DSS/NS	20	19	17	17
G17 Plus	8	8	5	8
LDP-led coalition	4	5	9	5
SPS	4	6	4	5
SPO	4	3	3	3

¶3. (SBU) Medium Gallup chief Srbobran Brankovic, Scan chief Milka Puzigaca, and Strategic Marketing head Srdjan Bogosavljevic all complained to Poloffs about the manipulation of their agencies' polling data in the press. Puzigaca alleged a malicious campaign to discourage voters inclined toward the DS by inflating SRS and DSS party ratings and also to demotivate LDP-inclined voters by falsely suggesting that the LDP was unlikely to pass the

five-percent election census. The opposite motivation may have been behind a recent press article in the Blic daily citing G17 Plus ratings of 11 percent, a clear inflation of its current popularity. Brankovic also blamed journalists' limited capacity to interpret and weigh raw polling data, which he says may have accounted for some press articles that falsely cited Medium Gallup polls placing the DSS coalition ahead of the DS. (A DSS insider close to the PM cited to us on 12/20 the DSS' belief that a Medium Gallup poll placed it ahead of the DS.)

TURNOUT AND UNDECIDED VOTERS

¶4. (U) Bogosavljevic and CeSID Executive Director Zoran Lucic both project that at least 3.7 million voters, or 55 percent of the electorate, will go to the polls, only a marginal decline from the turnout in Serbia's two previous parliamentary elections in 2000 and 2003. Brankovic and Puzigaca, however, told Poloffs that only 47-50 percent of the electorate is virtually certain to vote, with a higher turnout dependent on weather conditions and, perhaps most of all, the success of party campaigns to motivate their voters. Puzigaca was especially concerned that scheduling the elections on 21 January--the last day of Serbian children's winter break--will disproportionately hurt the DS and the LDP coalition because their more urban, educated voters may not return home from vacation in time to vote. As a result, she believes predicting the turnout for these elections is a fool's errand, particularly since the series of

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holidays that Serbia will have from New Year's to election day makes capturing a reliable sample of voters during that time virtually impossible.

¶5. (U) Strategic Marketing and Medium Gallup assess that around 20 percent of certain voters still have not decided which party to support, while CeSID's survey indicates that more than one-third of likely voters remain undecided. Most undecided voters are strongly inclined toward parties in Serbia's so-called democratic bloc, which underscores the importance of these parties' campaigns in getting out the vote, they said. Moreover, the bloc of democratic voters that Bogosavljevic defines as "progressive" are more undecided and more prone to abstention than those voters he defines as "conservative democrats," who gravitate especially toward DSS. This relatively high number of undecided voters lends considerable unpredictability to the elections, since the campaigns of the biggest parties are not likely to go into high gear until after New Year's. In essence, the main campaign battles are likely to be waged in an intense week starting on 9 January, just after Orthodox Christmas weekend, and ending with the preelection silence on 18 January.

DSS YET TO PEEL OFF POPULIST-ORIENTED RADICAL VOTERS

¶6. (SBU) Lucic views the efforts of the populist coalition led by Prime Minister Kostunica's DSS to win away nationalist-oriented voters from the camp of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) as the central battle of the election campaign. The DSS and its main coalition partner New Serbia (NS) hope that Radical leader Vojislav Seselj's efforts from The Hague to recommit the party

leadership to his Greater Serbia platform and to mute the party's less strident voices will enable them to siphon off populist votes from the SRS. NS leader Velimir Ilic in particular is reportedly going into Radical villages throughout Serbia carrying the unambiguous message that the DSS-NS coalition will hold onto power after elections and direct future capital investments only to those municipalities that demonstrate fealty to them in the elections. DSS insiders have told us that a major battle against the SRS for nationalist votes is shaping up throughout Sumadija.

¶7. (SBU) The jury is still out as to whether the DSS can significantly steal away support from the SRS, which retains the strongest base of determined voters. Strategic Marketing's Bogosavljevic indicates that 32 percent of determined voters and 35 percent of likely voters support the Radicals, while Lucic judges that the SRS could win as much as 38 percent of the vote if turnout is low. Both Bogosavljevic and Puzigaca told Poloffs that the SRS's voters remain loyal and determined to vote, despite the party's still-dormant campaign and the DSS's nationalist pandering.

¶8. (SBU) The pollsters disagree somewhat about the DSS's overall election prospects. Medium Gallup results suggest that support for the DSS coalition could top out at 20 percent and is likely, if anything, to decline as elections draw nearer. CeSID's Lucic also believes that the DSS's efforts to appeal to its national-conservative base and to soft SRS supporters--and its affiliation with crude populists like Ilic and especially Dragan "Palma" Markovic--can only win the party a limited number of additional votes because at the same time it will lose a portion of its urban, educated bloc of voters either to the DS or to abstention. Puzigaca and Bogosavljevic, however, assess that Ilic offers significant potential upside to Kostunica, giving his DSS access to votes in NS strongholds in central Serbia that it would otherwise not have. Puzigaca also points out that the DSS has managed to increase its number of certain voters by 17 percent since September, probably because of the adoption of the constitution and Kostunica's relentless Kosovo-related rhetoric. This increase is almost identical to the increase in Strategic

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Marketing polling after the adoption of the constitution in the percentage of voters who see Serbia moving "on the right track," which suggests potential traction for Kostunica's "national unity" message. A close advisor to President Tadic expressed worry to us earlier this week, however, that the DSS strategy of targeting the nationalist vote put it in a strong position to surpass the DS.

D STRUGGLING TO MOTIVATE VOTERS

¶9. (SBU) Support for Serbian President Tadic's Democratic Party actually outpaces that of the SRS in Scan's survey of the electorate as a whole, although the SRS enjoys an edge among certain voters. The DS therefore stands to gain significantly with a higher turnout. All four pollsters agree, however, that the DS's failure so far to promote a clear and concrete campaign message is only serving to confuse and demotivate its potential voters. Brankovic told Poloffs that

the numbers are unambiguous: Tadic should be aggressively highlighting the differences between the Democrats and the Radicals and projecting a clear idea of what a DS-led government would offer. Instead, Tadic continues to run as President and to make state visits abroad at the expense of a sustained campaign at home, and carefully downplays the differences between the DS and his likely DSS coalition partner. Tadic's plan to "allow" Kostunica to be prime minister again, even if the DS wins more votes, is the worst-kept secret in the campaign and is sapping morale in the party. We have not seen any electoral bounce for the democrats from the PfP invitation. At a 12/20 focus group observed by Emboff, not a single one of the ten respondents was aware of the PFP invitation or could describe what PFP is.

¶10. (SBU) Bogosavljevic (who is the main DS pollster and works closely with IRI and NDI) believes that the DS could even outpoll the Radicals, given Tadic's personal popularity and the contradictions in the DSS coalition. Our sources, however, continue to note fractiousness within the DS, with the campaign effort resembling Tadic's dysfunctional personal office and its duplicative titles, overlapping functions, and a preference for splashy spin over work in the trenches. The result is a lack of message discipline. Marko Djurisic, head of the DS's executive committee, admitted to Poloffs that the party is struggling to promote a coherent party program and risks confusing voters as it tries to broaden its appeal beyond its existing voting body.

¶11. (SBU) The coalition led by Cedomir Jovanovic's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stands to gain the most from a flaccid DS campaign. The LDP has the greatest potential in Vojvodina, where Puzigaca says a small number of DS voters were disenchanted by the party's support for the constitution, which granted the province very restricted autonomy. Recent Scan polling results, in fact, show the LDP coalition with 15 percent support in Vojvodina. All pollsters agree that the LDP's biggest obstacle is convincing sympathetic voters that their votes for LDP will not be wasted, a perception which could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In response, its coalition cleverly seized on published Scan polling results showing the LDP at 9 percent, with campaign posters promising that "9% is only the beginning." Scan, however, is the only major polling agency showing the LDP coalition definitively above the 5 percent election hurdle, with the other pollsters identifying a base of 180,000 voters firmly in the LDP camp but not yet enough undecided voters inclined to vote for them who could put them over the hump.

THREE OTHER PARTIES VYING TO CROSS ELECTION
CENSUS

¶12. (SBU) Only G17 Plus is safely above the margin of error for crossing the five-percent threshold in Medium Gallup and Strategic

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Marketing surveys. G17 Plus was the fastest party out of the blocks, but both Brankovic and Bogosavljevic expect the party's numbers to decline closer to the election census once the bigger parties start investing a lot more money

into their campaigns. Brankovic still expects G17 Plus in the end to cross the threshold because party leader Mladjan Dinkic is mounting the most energetic campaign, the party is flush with money, and the powerhouse US election consulting firm Greenberg Research has helped the party prepare an effective, focused campaign strategy.

¶13. (SBU) Longtime nemeses SPS and SPO are the only other parties that appear to have a shot at crossing the five percent census. Most pollsters rate the SPS's chances of squeaking past the threshold as good because the party avoided fracturing after its recent party congress and has a stable voting body that is certain to make it to the polls. The SPO, on the other hand, is very much a long shot, suffering even more than the LDP from the perception that a vote for the party is a wasted vote. Strategic Marketing and Medium Gallup, meanwhile, separately estimate that the minority Hungarian, Bosniak, and Albanian parties--which only have to cross a "natural" threshold of 13,000-16,000 votes, depending on turnout--will together secure 7-9 seats in the next parliament.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) These results from Serbia's most respectable pollsters indicate that it is unlikely that the ultranationalist SRS and SPS would be able to form a government on their own after elections. At the same time, the early polling numbers suggest that the combination of an unfavorable date for elections, the DS's muddled, uninspiring election campaign, and the DSS's populist pandering pose the risk of discouraging a huge bloc of democratically-inclined Serbian voters. Conversely, in a best-case scenario, the failure of both the DS and DSS campaigns to elicit support beyond their bases or even to avoid estranging parts of their voting bodies could help G17 and LDP cross the election census and thereby swell the ranks of pro-Western, reform-oriented parties in the next parliament.

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